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The National War College

**The President's Decision
to Attack Afghanistan and Sudan:
Conflicting Decision Styles Yields Controversy and Criticism**

The National Security

Process

Course 5603

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Introduction

On August 7, 1998, terrorist bombs exploded outside of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing over 250 persons. Over the course of the next two weeks, decision making processes were placed into motion based upon the analysis of intelligence data. These processes culminated in President Clinton's decision to authorize U.S. military attacks against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan on August 21st.

As could be expected, the President's decision to launch a retaliatory strike was met with both support and criticism. In this instance, however, a perceived requirement for secrecy caused confusion in, and thereby, criticism from many of the national-level actors normally involved in such decisions. An examination of the process using two models for decision-making reveals several possible justifications for this criticism.

The Road to Retaliation

The Decision

On August 20, 1998, at my direction, US forces conducted strikes in Afghanistan .. and in Sudan.

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I ordered these actions based on convincing information from a variety of reliable sources. . . I am providing this report as part of my efforts to keep the Congress fully informed . . . I appreciate the support of the Congress as we continue to take all necessary steps to protect US citizens at home and abroad. -- President Clinton (1998)

President Clinton's letter of August 21, 1998 to Congress revealed his decision to attack terrorist camps and installations. The announcement culminated a tense, two week period in which few persons knew the exact nature of the situation. In the aftermath of the U.S. Embassy bombings in Africa, intelligence sources quickly began to identify the bin Laden terrorist organization as the likely culprit. According to Weiner and Risen (1998) as reported in the New York Times on September 21

Shortly after investigators linked Osama bin Laden ... to the bombings, ... six of President Clinton's most senior advisors convened in the White House situation room to plot a counterattack with cruise missiles. **Few national security issues in Mr. Clinton's presidency were handled with greater secrecy or by a smaller group of people** [emphasis added].

Only a select few U.S. national leaders were involved in the decision to retaliate. As Weiner and Risen (1998) observed in the New York Times, "the Administration was determined to avoid leaks ... that meant limiting

deliberations to the "small group," the President's innermost circle." This group consisted of the President and Vice President, the National Security Advisor, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Director of Central Intelligence, according to a senior government official.

Normally in the aftermath of a surprise attack, the entire U.S. national security apparatus jumps into action. Its goal (1) to determine who was responsible and to understand their motive with the intelligence and law enforcement communities and the Department of State having primary responsibility, and (2) to determine what responsive action the US should undertake with the National Security Council, Department of State, Joint Chiefs of Staff and the appropriate U.S. military services having the primary responsibility for planning and assessing options

In determining alternatives for military action, standard processes and procedures are usually followed. As described by Allison's (1972) Model II for decision-making, this process involves and expects governmental action to result from the output of various organizations. In particular: (1) the lower-level decision-making actors come from throughout the government; who (2) based upon standard

operating procedures provide their priorities and perceptions (sometimes parochial) to the senior leaders, who (3) attempt to integrate these diverse inputs into a cohesive, coordinated national policy or action

While it appears some standard procedures for determining and assessing military targeting information were followed (Model II behavior), press reportings suggests that not all of the Joint Chiefs were consulted or involved in the President's ultimate decision. In a U.S. News and World Report article, Duffy and Newman (1998) reported that

As the President was deciding whether to attack facilities in Sudan and Afghanistan, there was no classified briefing in the Pentagon "tank" with the heads of the four military services and the chairman and vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

However, two weeks later Bedard (1998) reports in a J.S. News and World story that at least some of the Joint Chiefs were involved in the decision-making process. In particular, he described a meeting that was held less than 24 hours before the mission was to commence during which the United States' targeting for the attack was reviewed. He stated, "the White House pulled the third target after concerns arose during a briefing for select military chiefs

in the office of Gen. Sir Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff" emphasis added .

Reactions to the Decision

While the phrase "timing is everything" can be descriptive of some aspects surprise attacks, the phrase "who knew what and when" is equally descriptive of the process to assess support or criticisms of key decisions. Those persons who could be strongly believed to have been informed of the decision prior to its execution, or who subscribe to the adage that "politics stops at the water's edge" appeared supportive. As quoted in an ABC News report on August 21, 1998 those persons include

- House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who said "I think the United States did exactly the right thing today."
- Senator Ted Stevens R-AK (a former member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence), who said

I know (Defense Secretary William Cohen very well, I know (Gen. Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) very well, and I know (Air Force Gen.) Joe Ralston very well, and they were all part of this planning.

- Senator Alfonse D'Amato, R-NY, who said:

If people think the Congress is not going to be totally supportive of the commander in chief, they're just mistaken. This may serve notice that

whatever our local disagreements, we stand with our commander in chief, and he was absolutely proper and forceful.

Initial public reactions within the U.S. were mostly favorable. According to a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup poll (1998) taken just after the attacks were announced on August 20 "found 66% approved of the attacks, only 19% disapproved and the rest expressed no opinion." However during the next few weeks, the Administration was unable to completely or convincingly respond to criticism that it based its attack on weak information and to the Sudanese Government's assertions that the U.S. had blown up a pharmaceutical plant, not a chemical weapons factory. As a consequence Congressional, public, and worldwide criticism began to mount.

Dealing with the Criticism

Some criticism of the President's decision to bomb targets in Afghanistan and Sudan can be traced to his decision-making process. Persons who felt that they were key actors or "players" in the Bureaucratic Politics sense were angry that they had not been consulted in what they clearly felt were their areas of expertise. Others who

perhaps perceived a chance to advance parochial priorities, goals or interests as described in the Bureaucratic Politics Model (BPM) framework also expressed criticism of the decision. As quoted and reported by ABC News on August 21, examples of these persons include:

- Foreign leaders such as Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who was reported as saying, "I am outraged and I denounce this." His spokesman later tempered his words, indicating that Yeltsin was angry about not being notified before the attack.
- Senator Dan Coats, R-Ind, (a current member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence), referring to the President's concurrent legal and political problems relating to the Monica Lewinsky matter, said

While there is clearly much more we need to learn about this attack and why it was ordered today, given the president's personal difficulties this week, it is legitimate to question the timing of this action.

- Outside experts such as Douglas Johnson, a professor at the U.S. Army War College who was quoted by ABC News as asking, "If it's just facilities we were targeting, were we serious in the first place? Because facilities don't do things to people, people do."

Other criticism of the President's decision can be traced to his early resolution to limit the participants in his decision-making process and impose extremely tight security and "need to know". It is most likely that this area was the initial seed from which much of the later confusion and criticism grew.

Assessing the Decision: Observations and Conclusions

In making his decision to authorize retaliatory attacks, President Clinton was faced with several value-conflicts. In particular: (1) how to select and use the United States' national power to retaliate against a terrorist attack, (2) justifying his need to avoid conventional decision-making advice processes due to his perceived tight security requirements; while (3) operationally, and politically positioning himself in a manner that clearly would invite stinging comparisons to the Hollywood movie *Wag the Dog*. The President had arrived at a moment where, as George (1980, 31) described, he "simply could not make a good decision without sacrifice of some of [his] own interests or those of others."

In deciding for or against the Afghanistan and Sudan retaliatory attacks, a "top-down" rather than "bottom-up" decision process appears to have been employed. In this instance, the normal vetting procedures of ideas and options best described by Allison's Model II organization process were not used. In their place a hybrid combination of the Bureaucratic Politics Model and the Model II appears to have evolved. Illustrative examples of this hybrid process include.

- The President selected his most trusted advisors, who could solely provide and interpret information supplied by their Agencies (BPM).
- Reality required substantive interaction with selected members of his service chiefs representing the operators (Model II).
- Selecting key lawmakers to show the highly classified evidence that was crucial to the decision, likely expecting them to influence congressional and public opinion (BPM).
- Quickly declassifying, distributing, and describing to the public the telephone intercepts, soil sample analysis and human intelligence data to help buttress the Administration's position, relying on the public's common

sense to affirm the evidence justified the action. (BPM and Model II)

It is difficult to balance the need for security against the need for information sharing in the course of decision making. While the President alone may make an ultimate decision, the final judgment on whether that decision is perceived successful is made by the citizens. To that end, methods to further involve the citizenship, or at a minimum their elected representatives, in the decisionmaking process should be investigated. It is only after all interested parties' concerns are at least addressed that difficult courses of action can be widely accepted.

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